



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Volunteers, Refuge Staff Complete Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Albatross Counts

Laysan, Black-footed Albatross Populations Remain Relatively Stable

How do you tackle an albatross census when you're responsible for most of the world's population? One nest at a time, according to those who just completed the daunting task. A team of 19 volunteers worked through the holidays to complete a count of every active albatross nest on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. Braving gale-force winds and driving rain, they counted 408,133 Laysan albatross nests and 21,829 black-footed albatross nests during a 2½-week period between December 15 and January 3.

This complete assessment of Midway's nesting albatrosses is the fifth such effort in the last 13 years. Comparing this count with the first atoll-wide count in 1991, numbers of nests have remained fairly stable for both species, though numbers have fluctuated somewhat from year to year.

Comparable counts were conducted simultaneously at Laysan Island and French Frigate Shoals, both part of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. At Laysan Island, 140,861 Laysan albatross and 21,006 black-footed albatross nests were counted, and at French Frigate Shoals, refuge staff counted 3,226 Laysan and 4,259 black-footed albatross nests. Counts at these three sites totaled represent 93 and 77 percent of the world's Laysan and black-footed albatrosses, respectively.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is responsible for the management of 99 percent of the world's population of Laysan albatross and 96 percent of the world's population of black-footed albatross. These two species nest on all of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, and small numbers of Laysan albatross nest on Kauai, Oahu, and on several offshore islands in the main Hawaiian Islands. Midway is home to the greatest number of Laysan albatross, approximately 73 percent of the global population; and about 35 percent of the world's black-footed albatross.

The volunteer crew at Midway was split into four groups, each of which worked through assigned sections of the three islands at the atoll. Each group moved in a line through each section with a mechanical counter and an inverted paint can, used to make a tiny dot beside each active nest. Because the atoll's landscape includes a mixture of forests, fields, and thick brush, the volunteers got their exercise climbing and crawling as well as walking through the vegetation.

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This year's volunteer crew ranged in age from 31 to 79 and represented a variety of backgrounds and professions. The crew included two scientists from Japan who work with the endangered short-tailed albatross and counters from Alaska, California, Oregon, Washington State, Washington D.C., and Hawaii.

In addition to completing the albatross count, the volunteers worked on habitat restoration projects such as removing invasive plants, transplanting native plants, and propagating other plants in greenhouses. Other chores included fixing chainsaws and bicycles, clearing trails and vegetation for safety, and assisting with refuge maintenance. The team returned to Honolulu on January 8.

"It will be difficult to adjust to our normal lives again," said Beth Flint, the Service's senior seabird biologist for the Pacific Islands and coordinator of this year's albatross counts. "We already miss the moos, clucks, and 'eh-eh-eh's of the albatross that literally surround you on Midway. And all of us would like to return to visit after those 430,000 eggs hatch!"

Of the 21 species of albatrosses in the world, 17 have been identified as being at risk by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. "The most immediate threat to most of these species is mortality due to interaction with the world's commercial long-line fisheries," Flint explained. "Laysan and black-footed albatrosses are not immune to this problem, and thousands of each species are killed each year in international and domestic fisheries in the North Pacific."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.